

BOOK REVIEW

LYTTON JOHN MUSSELMAN AND HAROLD J. WIGGINS. 2013. **The Quick Guide to Wild Edible Plants.** (ISBN: 978-1-4214-0871-2, cloth). The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363, U.S.A. (**Orders:** www.press.jhu.edu, 1-800-537-5487). \$24.95, 144 pp., 116 color photos, 5 1/2" x 8 1/2".

Growing up in New England and spending much time in the Mid-Atlantic States, I was interested to get my hands on this little book to see what I knew about wild edible plants in my native habitat, and I was pleasantly surprised. Musselman and Wiggins offer us an easy-to-use guide to common edible plants of the Eastern Seaboard, most of which I am familiar with, some of which I have tried, and a number that sound, well ... interesting and worth an experimental taste test.

It is a self-described "quirky" guide which offers recipes for 31 wild edible plants, everything from aperitifs to sweets. In fact, the guide is developed almost like a cookbook, starting with condiments, ranging through greens and starches, and ending with cordials. The authors have a great sense of humor as they describe their many plant collecting forays "crossing icy streams in winter and tenacious miasmatic mud in scorching summer heat ... thorns and spines ... clouds of insects ... extracting plants from muck that seemed to extend to Middle Earth ... boiled, parched, ground, baked, and dehydrated only to find that what remained was a taste that would gag a maggot."

The authors don't attempt to cover every possible edible plant out there, but they have picked some great ones. It is a fast and easy read. Their recipes use few ingredients so as not to distract from the true flavor of the plant and were tested over many years on their sporting families and students. The authors provide botanical information on each of the plants and a cautionary overview of some of the key ones to avoid such as Poison Ivy and Poison Oak.

Reading this guide, I was initially puzzled over who, exactly, was the target audience. It is not meant as a survival guide for people dependent on foraging for existence as many of the recipes require patience on the part of the gatherer for the precise moment when the plant is in bloom or ready to harvest. For example, in describing the recipe for Cane Crispies, the authors admit to finding fruiting cane only 3 times in their 75 years of combined field work—though they claim it was worth the wait and search. It is hard to imagine someone lost in the Appalachian Mountains for that long. Then it began to dawn on me, the book was intended for those with enough background on plants to not make grave errors like the demise of Socrates, drinking Poison Hemlock. It is targeted for those of us who aren't dependent on foraging for survival, those with a love of the out-of-doors, with a willingness to get a little dirty and to try new things. The book is intended for someone like ... me!

From Cattail Corn Dogs to Pickled Orange Day Lily Buds (or Ditch Lilies as we used to call them) there are delectable treats to be had for the patient forager. How about some Black Locust Flower Fritters or Redbud Flowers on one's salad or ice cream? Yum! I've tried Nettle Omelets, Field Garlic, and Sassafras Tea. The one which I would love to try, and better yet, find a market for, is Crunchy Kudzu Leaf Chips. Just think ... a new snack food with a never-ending supply; although, we might have to change the name from Kudzu to something more palatably attractive.

My favorite recipe in the book, however, is the Musselman and Wiggins Wild Blueberry Cordial. Having spent many a summer at my step-father's rustic camp in Washington County, Maine, responsible for 90% of the nation's wild blueberry crop, I thought I had tried every blueberry concoction possible. I obviously missed one. I look forward to the day when I can un-cork a bottle of Wild Blueberry Cordial, put my feet up on the porch railing, and sip the dark blue, fruity drink while the sun sets over the lake.

Musselman and Wiggins have spent years researching edible plants and refining their recipes. Their experience and knowledge extends way beyond this fun, little guide book. I appreciate their wit and humor and their common-sense selections for easy-to-find wild edible plants. Perhaps they would like to take on Wild Edible Plants of Texas next?!—Gwen Michele Thomas, Chapter Coordinator for the Society for Ecological Restoration's Texas Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist, and Botanical Research Institute of Texas Volunteer.